



Galis, P. (2020). Désir et insoumission: la passivité active chez Nelly Arcan, Catherine Millet et Annie Ernaux by Joëlle Papillon (review). *The French Review*, 93(4), 210-211.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/tfr.2020.0128>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1353/tfr.2020.0128](https://doi.org/10.1353/tfr.2020.0128)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Johns Hopkins University Press at <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/767174> . Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

Polly Galis, University of Bristol
p.galis@bristol.ac.uk
 499 words

PAPILLON, JOËLLE. *Désir et insoumission: la passivité active chez Nelly Arcan, Catherine Millet et Annie Ernaux*. PU de Laval, 2018. ISBN 978-2-7637-3813-0. Pp. 212.

This study focuses on three auto-fictional publications: Nelly Arcan's *Folle* (2004), Catherine Millet's *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* (2001), and Annie Ernaux's *Se Perdre* (2001). Papillon's analytic approach thus diverges from a 'panoramic' trend that she identifies within the field of contemporary women's writing in French. This heightened focalization throws light on the authors' idiosyncratic writing styles and tropes, reinforced by the frequent subdivision of chapters according to narrative devices (including hyperbole, synecdoche, rhetoric, denomination, tense changes). These culminate in what Papillon terms a diverse "« grammaire du désir »" (171). She argues that female desire is a contradictory affair in these works, resting on insubordinate submission and active passivity. Nelly's masochism in *Folle* enables her to gain the upper hand over her lover, taking charge of the power dynamics at stake in their relationship. He victimizes her, but against his will. Catherine M. voluntarily partakes in acts of sexual degradation in *La Vie*, permitting a liberating state of permissiveness. She achieves this partly by disassociating love from desire, and through sexual encounters with multiple partners, during which the participants are reduced to their body parts and transcend restrictive gender binaries. In *Se Perdre*, the diarist recounts the arduous ordeal of awaiting her distant, married and evidently less committed lover. The narration of this power game complicates relations of agency, as the diarist is both prey to her desire, and its initiator and chronicler who has much to gain creatively from her romantic pain. The female narrators thus redeploy the

cliché of a passive, submissive woman in ways that grant them agency. Their submission also enables them to denounce oppressive social structures. In representing their loss of autonomy, they condemn the conditions that bring about this type of defeat, and “unfeminist” acts reveal themselves to be decidedly feminist. These works are hence prime examples of Butler’s theory of performativity, according to Papillon: they disrupt the status quo through an extreme mimetic performance of its structures and stereotypes. In particular, they bely standardized, dualist categories of femininity, being neither wholly passive and sentimental, nor conniving femmes fatales. To include desiring women as the central, narrating subjects of desire, moreover, already constitutes a political gesture for Papillon, since erotic texts and successive theorizations of desire have historically been directed by men. The intensity of this struggle, Papillon asserts, is reinforced through recurrently violent imagery (pertaining to loss, death, colonization, prostitution). Ultimately, Papillon questions the very fabric of the term desire, from a feminist perspective. She achieves this through assiduously close readings of the primary texts, and through engagement with a highly pluralized theoretical framework (featuring such incongruous theorists as Freud, Beauvoir, Bataille, Deleuze, and Guattari). This produces a rich, original, and authentic account of women’s desire and its depiction in women’s literature, making essential reading for women’s studies, gender and sexuality scholars, as well as literary researchers more broadly. Going forward, Papillon advocates studies of women’s desire in the work of racially, sexually, and geographically diverse authors, to further pluralize the narrative.